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## **Professional learning for distributed leadership: primary headteachers' perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

This article draws from a small-scale study of headteachers motivated to positively impact on the quality of pupil experience by involving all staff in a distributed perspective on leadership. Each headteacher perceived leadership as involving learned processes requiring support and experience, expending considerable effort in providing a fertile environment for learning about its practice. That perspective developed from their personal experience of challenging established leadership orthodoxies prior to and since appointment to headship. The article explores the impact of formal work-based postgraduate leadership preparation and experiential professional learning on each headteacher's understandings of distributed leadership and its practice. It then explores the ways in which they supported the professional learning of staff. It concludes by suggesting that headteachers and staff encounter a range of challenges in developing school practices inherent in distributed leadership and can benefit from ongoing support with informed reflection on practice beyond initial preparation for headship.

**Keywords:** distributed leadership; professional learning; leadership; management

## **Introduction**

Although much has been written, few empirical studies have explored the practice of a distributed perspective on leadership (Harris, 2014; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009a and 2009b) with fewer focusing on the headteacher's experience and perceptions (personal conversations with J. Spillane and T. Townsend, July 28, 2009; personal communications with C. Day, P. Gronn, H. Gunter, A. Harris, K. Leithwood, V. Robinson, H. Timperley, September 2009) and with notable exceptions (Murphy *et al.*, 2009; Spillane *et al.*, 2011b), still fewer focusing on the professional learning opportunities within a distributed perspective. This is surprising as it will be argued a distributed perspective on leadership offers a fertile environment in which teacher leadership and professional learning are fostered (Poekert, 2012: 171), as formal and informal leaders take forward new conceptualisations of school leadership.

Internationally, distributed leadership has been promoted in both policy and practice frames. The rejection of the charismatic hero leader model turned the spotlight away from the headteacher as solo school leader. Consequently, empirical studies have not focused sufficiently on the role of the headteacher in the practice of distributed leadership or on the operationalisation of the teacher leader role, despite empirical understandings of teacher leadership serving to inform and illuminate how distributed leadership operates in schools. Indeed, 'the construct of teacher leadership has not yet been subjected to research interrogation where "contingencies" associated with task, relationships, and context are the focus' (Crowther *et al.*, 2009: 39).

The study that informs this article set out to identify distributed leadership, its meanings, intentions and practice with a particular interest in the experiences and perceptions of primary headteachers. Papers published elsewhere have explored other themes and sets of findings arising from that study (see Torrance, 2013a-c). The specific purpose of this article is to explore the opportunities for professional learning arising from a distributed perspective on school leadership and management. In so doing, it highlights implications for supporting leadership development and for the development of schools as learning organisations.

The article begins with an overview of relevant background literature, articulating the definitions used in this study. The study and its methods are then presented, along with background information on the Scottish Qualification for Headship, the postgraduate programme each headteacher undertook as headship preparation. The findings of the study are presented and analysed under four key themes: the influence of the headteachers' professional histories; the impact of their formal postgraduate study; the utilisation of learned understandings to support the professional learning of staff; the contribution of the study to the professional learning of the headteacher and the development of the schools. The significance of the findings is then discussed before the article concludes with implications for policy and practice in relation to both headship preparation and workplace professional learning.

### **Background literature and definitions**

Educational leadership has drawn from various disciplines, heavily influenced by wider social, economic and political factors leading to many taken for granted assumptions (Gunter, 2005) some of which are 'highly dubious and problematic' (Gronn, 2003: 269).

As a consequence, considerable conceptual confusion underpins the genealogy of the field. Definitions of leadership are heavily contested (Leithwood *et al.*, 1999), as is its separation from management (Ball, 2008; Gunter, 2012). Available definitions tend to delineate leadership in relation to effectiveness or outcome, with an overly simplistic focus on positive outcomes (Spillane, 2006). Nevertheless, the positioning of educational before leadership serves to make clear the focus, nature and purpose of the activity as distinct from organisational leadership rooted in business management. Its uniqueness focuses on the promotion of effective teaching and learning (Bush, 2008b). This study aligned itself with the definition offered by Spillane and Coldren (2011: 78) who define leadership as ‘a relationship of social influence’, distinguishing expertise rather than formal position as the basis of authority (Timperley, 2009).

Defining distributed leadership is also problematic, perhaps explaining why few authors and researchers do so (Spillane and Diamond, 2007). Various terms have been promoted such as distributed, distributive and dispersed leadership (MacBeath, 2004) with little conceptual clarity, perhaps surprising since the practice of leadership is affected by how it is conceptualised. Although the same term may be used, a variety of meanings may be ascribed to distributed leadership (Duignan, 2008), bringing with it the danger of staff ‘talking past one another’ (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 26) or worse, competing understandings and motivations. This study aligned itself with the definition offered by Harris and Spillane (2008: 31) who use the term ‘distributed leadership perspective’ whereby multiple leaders regardless of any formal recognition, engage in a wide range of activities, where ‘leadership and management play out in tandem in practice’ (Spillane and Diamond, 2007: 152-3). As such, it recognised the difficulty in separating the theoretic distinctions between leadership and management in practice. The interactions in leadership

practice and the influence of leadership practice on school improvement processes become the focus. Such interactions concern ‘both formal and informal leadership and the way they produce different patterns of activity’ (Harris, 2008: 31).

Teacher leadership becomes necessary but potentially problematic within a distributed perspective, suffering from its own conceptual confusion. Understandings of teacher leadership are still developing, representing ‘a theory in action’ (Murphy, 2005: 46). Little of the limited literature available is based on empirical understandings. The focus for teacher leadership is often positioned as transforming curriculum and pedagogy (Hargreaves, 2009), without the identification of requisite collaborative processes or relationships between teacher leaders and colleagues, teacher leaders and formal leaders. Consequently, opportunities for and expectations of teacher leadership relationships are little understood. Lack of clarity is also apparent in the parameters for role definition. Such ambiguity brings with it inherent tensions.

Both ‘professional learning’ and ‘professional development’ suffer from conceptual ambiguity and imprecise definition (Turner and Simon, 2013). Rather than representing a single entity, they can be better represented by a spectrum ranging from transmissive, concerned with technical aspects, to transformational, concerned with developing the professional and their practice (Kennedy, 2005). Through his review of international theories and research, Mitchell (2013: 390) comes to define professional development situated in relationship to conceptualisations of professionalism, as ‘the process whereby an individual acquires or enhances the skills, knowledge and/or attitudes for improved practice’. Spillane *et al.* (2011b: 159) make the distinction between formal and on-the-job professional learning, framing professional learning as a theory of action through which,

‘school staff acquire new knowledge and skills that enable them to practice in new, hopefully improved, ways that in turn contribute to improvements in student learning’.

Whilst implicit links are often present in the literature on distributed leadership to the related concepts of teacher leadership and professional learning, explicit exploration is lacking (Spillane *et al.*, 2011b). In that regard, Poekert (2012: 186; 170) provides a valuable contribution to a discussion about effective professional development, concluding that ‘the development of teacher leadership is such a form of professional development’. Through the review of the literature that underpins this conceptual linkage, with 52 publications identified and 29 cited, Poekert (2012: 170) argues, ‘effective professional development leads to teacher leadership leads to effective professional development’, improving teachers’ practice and pupil performance. His work intentionally builds on that of York-Barr and Duke (2004), exploring the research literature from 2004 onwards. Among the parallels between teacher leadership within a distributed perspective and professional development, Poekert (2012: 176) identifies lack of attention to outcomes, ‘because it is far easier to define both teacher leadership and professional development as they should be rather than describe them as they actually are’. This, despite growing international attention focused on demonstrating the impact of professional development (Kennedy, 2013).

### **The study and its methods**

The study involved Scottish primary schools through three headteacher case studies, each representing a bounded system (Cohen *et al.*, 2006) illustrating a social entity and instance in action. Although each case was of interest in itself, together they provide insights into a broader investigation of distributed leadership. Small-scale research was selected reaching

depth of insight into the experience of research participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2006), exploring how the actors within those schools made sense of distributed leadership. The empirical methodology adopted an interpretive perspective, based on a grounded inductive-deductive model. A detailed literature review was delayed, to avoid introducing and imposing preconceived ideas on the developing analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The research questions themselves developed as the study progressed (Silverman, 2007), guarding against them presenting barriers to understanding.

The study's purposive sample was selected to provide insights from primary school headteachers identified as a marginalised group in the limited number of empirical studies conducted to date. The literature (e.g. Bell, 2007; Spillane's work) suggested key differences between the size, structures and complexity of primary and secondary schools would make it difficult to draw parallels between the sectors. All three were headteachers within the same Scottish local authority having in theory been subjected to the same recruitment and selection criteria and procedures. The literature review (e.g. Day, 2009; Pascal and Ribbins, 1998) suggested that reflections on practice would be enhanced by drawing from headteachers in post for around two years, having had sufficient time to become established whilst still thinking through their actions and intentions as they progressed their perspective on leadership and management. The headteachers' ages ranged from 33 to 40 years, educated within the same education 'era' with a similar historic and professional policy frame of reference. Each headteacher was known in their local authority as promoting a distributed perspective. Prior to engagement with the study, each articulated a commitment to a distributed perspective within their schools.



Multi-methods were adopted generating different data sets, emphasising qualitative methods, getting at actors' understandings. The headteachers' voices were highlighted through a sequence of four in-depth, semi-structured interviews, one of which adopted a narrative style. In addition, the headteachers were each asked to keep a reflective diary, for a four-week duration. The study extended beyond self-reporting as staff perceptions of school leadership and management were elicited through a 360° analysis, a semi-structured questionnaire exploring the extent to which leadership was distributed within each school. That 360° questionnaire incorporated a sociometric analysis of the leadership relationships within the school. The interview style adopted supported each headteacher in recalling processes and approaches taken, as well as any role played either directly or indirectly in taking forward a distributed perspective. Data from the 360° questionnaire and inbuilt sociometric analysis informed the third and fourth interviews. The research methods encouraged the headteachers to reflect on the 'lived' as well as the 'designed' experience of leadership situated within their schools (Spillane and Coldren, 2011). Vignettes from the interviews and diaries exemplified key findings.

A huge amount of 'rich data' was generated, 'to get beneath the surface of social and subjective life', trawled through repeatedly by hand, to develop in-depth knowledge of the data, then identify meanings and understandings (Atkinson, 1998) forming key themes or codes for exploration (Charmaz, 2006: 14; 13). Having compiled all apposite data, a case record (Durrant and Holden, 2006 drawing on Stenhouse, 1978) was constructed for each case study, similar to Yin's (2009) conceptualisation of a case study database. Each case record was constructed around the five research questions, the 'etic issues' or 'thick descriptions' (Stake, 1995: 20 and 2000) underpinning the study:

- What do primary headteachers understand as distributed leadership?
- What do primary headteachers identify as the key characteristics of distributed leadership if they believe it to be embedded in the practice of their particular schools?
- To what extent, in the opinion of staff, do those characteristics currently operate in their particular schools?
- How do those primary headteachers think those characteristics have come about? (e.g. naturally and/or purposely planned for)
- What do primary headteachers (and their staff) perceive as the benefits and/or problems arising from operating a distributed perspective in practice?

Extracts from the interviews, key findings from the 360° questionnaire data as well as data from the sociometric analysis were drawn from to present a comprehensive picture of each case, forming the basis for the next stage of analysis within which key themes, the ‘emic issues’ or ‘research questions revealed by actors’ (Stake, 1995: 20 and 2000), emerged for exploration within each case study. In so doing, a more considered depth of analysis was reached. The final stage of analysis involved the pulling together and analysis of findings across the case studies.

Whilst the case study research represented ‘a concentration on the specific rather than the general – a choice of depth over breadth’ (Burton *et al.*, 2008: 67), recognition is paid to the small number of cases involved. The sample size was not determined at the beginning of the study, becoming clear once repetition of themes emerged and adequacy was established (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 23). Regardless, the findings have clear limitations

and could not claim to be representative although they could have relevance to similar population groups (Bell, 1993).

### **Background on the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH) Programme**

Each headteacher was a SQH graduate, conferred with both a Postgraduate Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management, and the professional award of the SQH, having met the competences of the Standard for Headship (S/H) (SEED, 2005). The programme leading to the SQH is premised around critical reflection on the theory of educational leadership and management in and on work-based practice. The headteachers were familiar with the policy frame and had been exposed to clear expectations that SQH participants take forward a distributed perspective.

As discussed in Torrance (2013d), the SQH derived from a 1997 Labour Party manifesto commitment to develop a mandatory pre-appointment headteacher qualification. Introduced in 1998 first as a pilot and then as a national programme, the SQH was at the cutting edge of worldwide development since, with the exception of North America, there were very few programmes of its type in existence (Brundrett and Crawford, 2008; Hallinger, 2003a). In the decades prior to the introduction of the SQH and the now terminated Chartered Teacher programme (a scheme enabling topmost main grade teachers to develop and be financially recognised for teaching expertise having demonstrated competence at the Standard for Chartered Teacher), postgraduate courses in Scotland were broadly designed and perceived as ‘academic’. However, by the early 1990s, there was a growing acceptance that skills developed in the workplace should be seen as an integrated part of academic programmes (Brundrett, 2010). The challenge was to design and deliver programmes addressing the professional needs of teachers whilst maintaining academic

rigour (Black *et al.*, 1994). This prompted the development of masters' programmes in education blending formalised provision with professional experience, individualised development and academic qualification (Brundrett, 2010). In this way, the SQH challenged conventions in respect to postgraduate study, pushing the boundaries of higher education institutions.

The SQH is premised on a set of design principles underpinned by research into professional learning (see Torrance, 2011 and 2013d), 'process knowledge' is emphasised through critical reflection on, in and for practice (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Schon, 1991), drawing from external perspectives and continuous formative feedback to facilitate learning, leading to influence on practice. The learning and assessment activities are designed to make connections between the personal and professional context of the individual, the policy context in Scotland and the conceptual and research framework written up in the international literature on school leadership and management, and professional development (Torrance, 2013d). Based on a programme utilising work-based action learning projects to address a professional standard in Scotland (SfH, 1998, 2005, 2012), one of the original principles underpinning the SQH was its contribution towards developing the school sector. The involvement of universities ensured that although the SQH programme is set within contemporary 'good practice', programme participants are encouraged to be critical and to challenge orthodoxy, 'to look outward to hard social and political issues and to interrogate their own position and perspectives' (Cowie, 2008: 34; Cowie and Crawford, 2007).

The SQH provides a medium within which participants can develop an image of themselves as headteachers, empowering them through its authority and a growing

confidence with use of government endorsed professional language (Reeves and Forde, 2004). It offers a powerful model of professional learning, combining theoretical and practical approaches through workplace learning (Reeves *et al.*, 2002). For example, Cowie *et al.* (2007: 10) found that new headteachers who had undertaken the SQH programme highlighted:

how reading and reflection on reading confirmed inherent preferences for collegial approaches, encouraged them to behave in a collegial manner, and sometimes challenged the ways in which they managed.

### **Findings and analysis**

All three headteachers had a good understanding of what they meant by distributed leadership, attaching different meanings to the term (Duignan, 2008). There was some conceptual confusion evident in terms of the distinctive (Gronn, 2003; Spillane and Diamond, 2007), complementary (Durrant, 2004) and overlapping (Bush, 2008a) nature of leadership and management. Regardless, leadership was privileged as distinct from management (Gronn, 2003; Gunter, 2005) and positioned as a higher order set of processes to management (Gunter, 2012; Spillane and Coldren, 2011). Each headteacher was able to articulate the rationale for and strategic intentions behind a distributed perspective, the range of processes intentionally engaged with to purposefully take forward that perspective.

Four key themes emerged from an analysis of the findings with regard to the professional learning for distributed leadership from the headteachers' perspectives: the influence of their professional histories; the impact of their formal postgraduate study; the utilisation of

learned understandings to support the professional learning of staff; the contribution of the study to the professional learning of the headteachers and the development of the schools.

### ***The influence of the headteachers' professional histories***

The headteachers did not talk about their 'distributed perspective', nor did they refer to a 'distributed perspective on leadership' (Harris and Spillane, 2008; Spillane, 2006), nor did they refer to a 'distributed perspective on leadership and management' (Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Spillane and Coldren, 2011), they talked about distributed leadership. One headteacher preferred the term 'shared leadership' (Hallinger and Heck, 2009). Another more often used the term 'distributive leadership' (MacBeath, 2004), as adopted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe - now part of Education Scotland, a body created in 2011 to combine responsibilities for inspection and review, curricular reform and teacher development) in contemporary policy documents reflecting the Scottish Government policy agenda.

The headteachers felt they had a good understanding of what lay behind the term 'distributed leadership', developing understandings over a number of years, through key posts across a number of schools, beginning with a perspective gained from the class teacher vantage point. With one exception, they had in the main been supported by headteachers acting as gatekeepers to leadership opportunities either encouraging them through their understanding and practice of a distributed perspective, or being open to a new perspective on leadership and management. Regardless, there was a sense that each case study headteacher had pushed the boundaries of established practice in each school they had previously worked. On taking up headship in their current school, each had inherited traditional structures and cultures. They drew from their professional histories,

their knowledge, understandings and experiences to inform their practice as they set about developing a distributed perspective not previously regarded as the norm.

The first headteacher's understandings of distributed leadership developed through four key posts. She described herself as having been on a 'journey' of development, emphasising the learning engaged with to help her 'grow'. She acknowledged, 'my own professional development has clearly influenced how I am now as a headteacher'. Working with other leaders and managers had shaped her developing perspective. Reflecting on their leadership styles, she had come to understand how she did not want to lead and manage, conveying a clear sense of having challenged conventions throughout her career.

The second headteacher's understandings of distributed leadership had developed through three key posts. She conveyed a strong sense of constantly developing her own perspective, skills and abilities within each school context. All three headteachers she had worked with had had a hand in shaping her perspective. She reflected on their leadership styles, seeking to learn from the distributed perspective of the first two – 'how they empowered me and allowed me to take things forward within schools' – and from the top-down approach of the third – 'It really [put] an almost full stop to my project because that way of working wasn't taken forward by the new headteacher'.

The third headteacher's understandings of distributed leadership had developed through four key posts. She was particularly candid in reflecting on herself as a leader and manager, adopting a critical position on her practice, leading her to question actions and motivations as she endeavored to reach a depth of understanding. She did not wax lyrical on the abilities of the three headteachers she had worked with to distribute leadership. She

did, however, feel very fortunate to have worked with them as they encouraged her to develop her own leadership style, delegating to her.

Each of the three headteachers had come to appreciate the significance of school context and culture, illustrated by the first's reflection on the challenge of taking forward a distributed perspective as an acting depute: 'And that was when I realised it was culture – it wasn't process. So, over a period of about 18 months, I just took little steps with them'. Each drew from this appreciation on appointment to headship, actively changing embedded top-down approaches. The first consciously developed 'a culture of openness', seeking ways to 'restart the culture'. The second set about changing a dependency culture in which it was 'just incredible [the] amount of things that people would ask me about'. The third was very aware of the need to set an expectation of distributed leadership to change a 'locked down' culture in which previously, staff 'never left the staff meeting without absolutely knowing what it [was] that the headteacher wanted them to do', having 'had a row before, for thinking'.

Each headteacher's understanding of distributed leadership was underpinned by research, literature and policy discourse. In that regard, engagement with postgraduate study had influenced their developing practice in past and present roles.

### ***The impact of formal postgraduate study on the headteachers' professional development***

Postgraduate study had and continued to support each headteacher in a number of ways. They had gained informed understandings of what a distributed perspective comprised, confidence in how to develop their own practice, capitalising on a sense of legitimized



action that engagement in postgraduate study provided in challenging established school practices.

The importance of leadership preparation and its impact surfaced at various points. The three headteachers were driven by a belief that distributed forms of leadership positively impact on school practice. That belief was nurtured within the postgraduate leadership preparation programme they had experienced, premised upon the S/H, positioning distributed leadership. The theoretical frame they had developed informed their understandings of effective school leadership and provided the impetus to challenge established orthodoxies. Their role and the approaches they were progressing were legitimized for them and for the headteachers they were working with. Where that headteacher had also completed the programme, there was a shared understanding of the rationale. Where that headteacher had not completed the programme, such understanding was lacking and the headteacher concerned was required to take a leap of faith and trust that all would end well.

The influence of postgraduate study on each headteacher and their practice was apparent on a number of occasions. Each highlighted the impact the SQH and engagement with the leadership and school improvement literature had had on their ability to reflect in and on practice. Reflecting on her first headship, the first recognised that her understanding of distributed leadership was not the same as colleagues':

the thing I needed to remember was I'd gone through a really rigorous Postgraduate programme to learn and develop my skills and understand the theories behind all of this. They hadn't. And it was unfair to expect that they thought that that was just

the way that they should work. So they did need my input, just to give a supportive layer underneath what they were doing.

The second highlighted the ‘big effect’ the SQH had had: ‘I knew that that was the thinking behind shared leadership, distributed leadership and staff having ownership of it’. Reflecting on the literature in her practice and the practice of the headteachers she worked with had shaped her developing perspective and practice:

in all the models that I’ve worked with it’s definitely the one that I think is the most effective in helping bring about continuous improvement in schools. ... Well, I mean obviously through my SQH you did a lot of reading on shared distributed leadership. And any research that I’ve ever read through doing my SQH made such sense to me. ...a lot of that was because I was reading things and I could compare it with what I’ve seen and what I’ve worked in. And I could see that what the authors were writing, or researchers were writing was absolutely right.

On appointment to first headship towards the end of SQH, the second headteacher had, ‘very quickly tak[en] that into practice’, sharing insights gained with the staff. Through critical reflection she had been supported to develop a realistic view of her practice:

...I remember doing my 360 way back at the beginning of my SQH,...and lots of people in their feedback to me was ‘[own name] likes to do everything herself because she knows that that will get done the best’. ...and I still find it funny because there is still that part of me that feels that if I want something done right I’d probably be better doing it myself.

The third headteacher regarded herself as a lead learner, returning to postgraduate study throughout her career to access support each time she was unsure of how best to proceed. She critically reflected on her practice, candidly exploring the many aspects of a distributed perspective she found challenging. She frequently referred to the influence of postgraduate study, having undertaken a Masters before embarking on the SQH. At various points of her career she had engaged with the leadership literature, seeking out richer understandings to develop her practice, beginning with her nursery leadership role:

at that point I did my first postgraduate course. And I did that deliberately because I really didn't really know where to go with the whole thing. I had really strong staff who could lead themselves basically. But I had a clear vision of what I wanted to do and it wasn't happening. So, went on the course and I actually used a course as a way of becoming the leader in a group. Because, I had to evidence leadership in the nursery within certain contexts.

She returned to postgraduate study as a newly appointed acting deputy encountering staff resistance:

I did what I always do, I went back to Uni and I looked for a course 'cause I thought 'I don't know what I'm doing now. I need to learn a bit more about how to get people to work together'. And that's when I did my Masters ... I looked at all the research into collaborative enquiry. ... and the teachers were really really positive about it. And again it's 'cause they did it. And it was so powerful because it wasn't just me running about trying to embed a science programme. It was

everybody, everybody did it. ... And the difference in the results from the beginning to the end were huge, massive in how much control the staff felt over what they were doing. How they had enjoyed it and how fast it had developed.

The third headteacher was specific about the role postgraduate study had played in developing her understandings of distributed leadership:

I don't think I'd actually heard the phrase until I went on SQH. And I thought it was something really new you know. But actually it wasn't new, it was what I'd experienced, and hopefully what I'd encouraged others to do. And I think what the SQH taught me was that it was more about the activities you do with people rather than, I think some people think it's delegation. And it really is about building community and about building activities that people feel they can lead within. And they feel comfortable within.

Through postgraduate study, her actions and leadership role were legitimized in the eyes of colleagues although she recognised:

you know, you can read all the textbooks and whatever and the theory on distributed leadership. But actually seeing it in action is difficult to find.

In that regard, all three headteachers conveyed the sense of learning from theory and practice through work-based professional development. This enabled them to push professional boundaries and challenge established practices, through constructions of new

understandings of leading and managing schools. That awareness underscored the need to support the professional learning of staff.

### **The utilisation of learned understandings to support the professional learning of staff**

Each of the headteachers was highly reflective, articulating their philosophy in relation to educational leadership and management. Each articulated the rationale for and motivation behind their distributed perspective, seeking to positively impact on the quality of pupils' educational experience. Each was committed to making sense of a distributed perspective with staff in practice, endeavoring to build the school's capacity through developing shared ownership over school improvement, empowering and engaging staff in collective decision-making and concerted action. To ensure that impact, they regarded staff as the most valuable resource, expending considerable effort supporting professional learning, finding ways to contextualise their distilled understandings.

Each of the headteachers was in her early years of headship, still thinking through and learning about a distributed perspective in practice similar to Kinder's (2010: 17) perspective of learning 'as sense-making occur[ing] in a specific sociocultural context'. In the absence of sound theory, clarity of concept or agreed definition, each was also engaged in 'sense-making' with their staff (Spillane and Caldren, 2011: 7), considering knowledge of individual staff to be key, using that knowledge to get the best from staff.

Each headteacher was aware of a constant danger of contrived collegiality (Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992), describing processes reflecting Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) conceptualisation of arranged collegiality. They were also aware of the power located

within their designated role and the thin line between actively supporting professional learning and manipulation. This was most strikingly illustrated by the third headteacher who frequently reflected upon the term ‘manipulation’ as she endeavored to make sense of the realities of the practice of distributed leadership. She recognised the contribution distributed leadership made to empowering staff, developing a sense of staff feeling ‘valued’, developing a sense of responsibility for the wider school, as well as seeing their ‘impact on the school’. However, she also recognised that, ‘you just get more done’:

it’s really quite straightforward. You just get the staff to decide they want to do it [laughed], you know.

A distributed perspective had not been thought to be naturally occurring but rather, all three headteachers suggested it had and continued to require sustained effort (Torrance, 2013b). The headteachers legitimised leadership as integral to staff roles, working with staff to develop a professional identity incorporating leadership. In so doing, staff were encouraged to take on more and go the extra mile, reflecting ‘*work redesign*’ (Louis *et al.*, 2009: 158). A distributed perspective appeared to require a shift in the professional identity of both promoted and unpromoted staff (Leithwood *et al.*, 2009b; Mayrowetz *et al.*, 2009; Murphy *et al.*, 2009), illustrated by the first headteacher:

I think there’s a growing move to this ... And that comes from the research. It comes from professional agreements that we’ve got. ...there’s a dilemma between the old and the new. People who have been in post a very long time who believe that there is one way to lead a school and one way only. And then there are other

people, perhaps the new breed who have come through, who see that actually you can get a lot more out of people, people are happier, it's more collaborative, the place grows together when we distribute leadership. So there's probably a tension at the minute between two different styles.

A distributed perspective appeared to require a shift in the professional identity of teachers and support staff (Carroll and Torrance, 2013), illustrated by the second headteacher in two different interviews:

staff are very confident in coming to me if they see things that need done. What they probably aren't confident with is where there's going to be a real big impact on the way they do things. ... I think that takes longer and I think that's more about these professional discussions that we have. ... So I think for these bigger changes ...that needs to come from someone who's more confident with a certain thing. And whether that's me or, one of the teachers. But in my staff just now I know that it's going to have to be me

what I found the most interesting when I started looking at [the feedback from staff] was actually the support staff. ... I wondered if it was down to what they perceive their job as. ... So maybe then they get, you know, a perception that they are not the leader, it's the teacher that's the leader. Whereas I just feel when I work with them, they just seem a lot more, I think mature's the word [laughs], you know. ... So the support staff are kind of split down the middle [depending on their role]. ...as the headteacher you have a really different relationship with your support staff. It's kind of a closer, I always think it's a closer one than with your teaching

staff. You know, 'cause you are like, you meet beyond the classroom more. ... But do they get to be a leader in the class? I don't know. Probably not.

On appointment, each headteacher had set about changing school cultures to embrace a distributed perspective (Leithwood *et al.*, 2009b), reflecting re-culturing (Fullan, 2001). Their intention was to develop the school as a learning community (Murphy *et al.*, 2009) through continuous staff engagement in self-evaluation, critically reflecting on practice to identify priorities for further improvement. In so doing, they purposefully endeavoured to change how staff felt, thought and acted. At a strategic level, the headteachers appreciated that in order to capitalize on the influence exerted by leaders and followers, it was vital staff understood the direction set for school improvement and the underpinning school vision and values. There was an expectation that staff would pull together to develop a level of independence and problem solving, as well as ownership of school improvement initiatives through taking responsibility and feeling a sense of empowerment. This reflected features of 'academic optimism' (Hoy *et al.*, 2006). Collective effort was in the main focused on what Spillane and Coldren (2011) would describe as the core work of the school.

On appointment, each prioritised developing such understanding with their staff. Thereafter, they had set about developing what Spillane (Spillane and Coldren, 2011: 40; Spillane *et al.*, 2011a) would term organizational tools and routines, contributing to the '*situation*' or environment, by framing staff interactions and creating infrastructures for distributed leadership. Organizational tools enabled organizational routines to function. All three case study headteachers utilized the collegiate time agreement to engage staff and focus their efforts. The first had a published list of all staff, each assigned a leadership role.



The second had drawn up a formalised timetable with non-contact time to enable support staff to progress leadership roles, making much use of the title ‘co-ordinator’ to raise the profile of informal leaders in committees and groups at school and cluster levels. The third had developed policies with staff to build consensus for a range of aspects of schoolwork.

Organizational routines were evident in each school designed to pull staff together and focus their collective efforts on improving learning and teaching. All three headteachers sought and developed strategies for collaborative school improvement, putting in place structures such as committees and working groups. They emphasized the role of CPD and the professional development review process. They made purposeful use of the different stages of the school improvement planning process. They intentionally engaged teaching and to a lesser extent support staff in on-going self-evaluation processes. The first had established an extended management team and leadership group. The second had a sophisticated set of processes for on-going self-evaluation. The third had developed design briefs to support and guide the progression of school improvement initiatives and had been fully supportive of the principles behind the ‘staff huddle’. Through their participation in the study, each headteacher expressed that reflecting on the practice of distributed leadership had contributed to their own professional learning and to the identification of next steps for school development.

### ***The contribution of the study to the professional learning of the headteachers and the development of the schools***

By nature, distributed leadership was socially constructed (Spillane, 2005a), an active process, involving negotiating meanings. The headteachers were careful to articulate with staff the fundamental principles to their distributed perspective (Harris and Lambert,

2003): the broad based involvement of staff and staff learning opportunities, agency to influence and change.

Despite their commitment, insight and postgraduate study, all three headteachers were still learning how to take forward a distributed perspective within the context of their current school (Louis *et al.*, 2009; Mascall *et al.*, 2009). Their learning was situated within the school as a learning organization (Hayes *et al.*, 2004; Senge, 2006), sharing many features of diagnosis and design explored by Spillane and Coldren (2011). As illustrated in the previous section by the headteachers' insights, supported by staff 360° questionnaire responses and sociometric analysis, all staff appeared to be learning in context how to take a distributed perspective forward, under the stewardship of each headteacher (Anderson *et al.*, 2009; Day, 2009; Hallinger and Heck, 2009; Leithwood *et al.*, 2009b; Murphy *et al.*, 2009). That learning was ongoing and each headteacher drew from participation in the study to enhance their understandings of the degree to which their distributed perspective was embedded and to identify next steps for further development.

#### *Contribution of the study itself to the professional learning of the headteacher*

Commitment to learning together for school improvement underpinned each headteacher's engagement with the study. Each accepted there might be uncomfortable findings, working hard to understand implications for their own practice, vigilant to the learning potential for the school as an organisation.

The first described herself, the staff and the school as being 'on a journey' of discovery and development. She articulated that participation in the study had been 'hugely positive' and 'an extremely useful opportunity' for her, 'from a personal point of view [she] found it

very very helpful too', 'very reassuring'. Participation had been 'like taking stock', 'to refocus [her] thinking about where we go next'. Moreover, she found the approaches and methods adopted supportive stating: 'I really enjoyed it'; 'I always go away 'clearer'; 'it's like a mini coaching session'; 'it's allowed me to clarify [my initial thoughts] even more just through speaking. I liked the openness of it'.

The second welcomed participation in the study since she considered, 'it may be interesting to reflect on how effective the shared leadership actually is and not how I think it is!'. Since her appointment, the school had had neither a local authority review nor an HMIE inspection, perceiving participation as accessing 'an external view' to support the school's self-evaluation in its efforts to continuously improve. She also perceived the timing of the study as being of particular relevance to her own professional learning, articulating that participation had been 'really valuable' and 'mutually beneficial'. It had helped her to 'think it through and identify, you know, key things in my mind'.

The third perceived participation as offering ideal timing in relation to supporting her own professional learning. She demonstrated considerable self-awareness, perhaps most evident in the revisiting of her concerns about the potential '*manipulation*' of staff. She reflected that participation had been 'really positive', 'fascinating' and 'thought provoking'. It had 'added' to her understandings of the school and provided 'good information to have at a school improvement level'. She recognised the need to be 'a bit braver' in her conversations with staff instead of relying on the convenience of positioning the management role of the local authority when seeking staff cooperation and compliance. She also came to appreciate that she placed different expectations on experienced and

‘younger teachers’, recognising the implications of this for her own practice: ‘Maybe my perception of younger teachers needs to change.’

Each headteacher saw potential in developing school culture further and perceived it as their role to take that forward, particularly in relation to changing their own behaviours.

### *Contribution of the study itself to the school’s development*

A distributed perspective was work in progress, not yet deeply embedded in school culture or practice. It was dependent on each headteacher who, concomitantly, set the boundaries for focused and collective effort. In the words of the first headteacher:

I now need to go on and develop a culture. I think they perceive constraints, I don’t, but it’s about making explicit to them of freedom and empowerment.

Each new member of staff required to be socialised into that culture (Simon, 1991). There was vulnerability evident through the headteachers’ continued effort not to jeopardise progress made, and through their expressed reservations of a potentially negative impact if a new headteacher was appointed with a top-down approach. Staff responses indicated that they expected to be provided with time to lead and that for some staff, leadership was not considered an integral part of their professional identity. The first headteacher reflected:

there are still a few that see it as an add-on, rather than an inbuilt into what we do, and that’s just something I need to manage carefully and sensitively ... it’s about people wanting to do it for the intrinsic reward as much as anything else, but not people only saying ‘yeah, I’ll take on a leadership role if I get...’.

Some staff in each school did not perceive themselves to play a leadership role (Murphy *et al.*, 2009); some found it difficult to step into a leadership role (Slater, 2008). The first headteacher reflected:

some of them are still deciding whether they want to be leaders or not because they're grappling with the traditional view they have of a teacher, who is someone who works in just their own classroom with four walls around them

There appeared to be a mutual regard between support staff and headteachers enabling support staff to act with a degree of autonomy. However, specific to each context, there was incongruence between the headteachers' view and the support staffs' view of their leadership role as expressed by the third headteacher: 'maybe they don't understand what leadership is... Maybe they've never thought about it before'. Moreover, although the headteachers believed support staff made a significant contribution to school leadership, most teachers did not, perhaps attributable to those leadership roles being focused outwith the classroom, visible only to the headteachers.

Across the case studies, a division surfaced within established hierarchies with respect to distinct differences between the patterns of influence of teaching and non-teaching staff. The first headteacher perceived a hierarchy at play precluding support staff from having influencing discussions with teachers. The second headteacher had purposefully developed the role of support staff to the point where they had a public leadership role, creating tensions between teaching and support staff. The third headteacher became concerned about a dual role played out by support staff, often observed as more leaderly than many

teachers within the school's public spaces, subservient to teachers within classrooms.

The leadership of teachers was predominantly classroom focused. They did not perceive themselves to have a role in developing the leadership capacity of support staff. This could in part be due to lack of understanding of such responsibility within initial teacher education (Calder and Grieve, 2004) and in-service training (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009; Mistry *et al.*, 2004). All three headteachers recognised this as an area for further development. The second identified developing better understandings of the leadership role of support staff as a priority for her to take forward. The third identified the need to make explicit the leadership role support staff played within whole school areas and their potential leadership role within classroom contexts. The first headteacher reflected:

what I've been able to analyse is that the people who need a bit more support and nurture and involvement in all of this are my non-teaching staff that's where I need to move to next. ... and that's definitely something that would be very easy to work on.

In addition to establishing an understanding of the role of support staff within their distributed perspective, common across the case studies was the observation by the headteachers that the line management of support staff needed to be improved (Mistry *et al.*, 2004). Related to that was the need to clarify the role of the learning support teacher and business manager. Associated with that, was the need for ongoing professional learning (Blatchford *et al.*, 2009).

## **Discussion**

To large extent, distributed leadership was found to be ‘in the gift of the headteacher’ (Torrance, 2013a and c), pacing the rate and extent of leadership distributed, maintaining an overview and quality assuring the process. Each headteacher’s purpose in taking forward a distributed perspective was essentially, to develop the school as a professional learning community (Mitchell, 2013; Murphy *et al.*, 2009; Senge, 2006). Similar to Wenger’s (2000) communities of practice, informal leaders were afforded their influence through credibility with peers and appreciated expertise in relation to specific aspects of school work, rather than through friendship or assigned role. Each headteacher perceived themselves as central to actively changing school culture and developing staff professional learning.

The engagement of staff in leadership roles had not happened by chance (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2001; Killion, 1996; Murphy *et al.*, 2009; Slater, 2008). It had come about through purposeful planning by setting clear expectations, modelling, utilising enabling processes, devising enabling strategies and developing enabling structures. They made deliberate decisions and took practical actions. They appreciated that teacher leadership needed support (Harris and Muijs, 2004; Murphy, 2005b). The headteachers were intentionally developing with teachers an enhanced professional identity incorporating a leadership role (Burton and Brundrett, 2005; Murphy *et al.*, 2009), recognising and seeking to widen the traditional view of a teacher (Murphy, 2005b). Where identified, they harnessed understandings of a distributed perspective, encouraging teachers enthusiastic to engage. They sought opportunities and overcame recognised barriers (Murphy, 2005b; Murphy *et al.*, 2009). They also recognized the need to support less enthusiastic or less confident teachers (Slater, 2008).

Although much had been achieved in that regard, it was still work in progress. Distributed leadership overwhelmingly focused on school improvement plan priorities or headteacher priorities. This provided coherence, consensus and a strategy for the use of finite resources but limited the scope for spontaneous leadership or grass roots change. It legitimised the nature of teacher leadership but set boundaries, limiting influence to operational levels. Teachers were still waiting for permission to act and then acting within agreed parameters. Support staff could have a leadership role in ‘whole school’ areas but not within the classroom. What did not emerge from the findings was a sense of teachers or support staff identifying for themselves through critical reflection, aspects of their practice that they identified as requiring improvement, then collaborating with colleagues to experiment with practice and identify solutions to issues identified. It is difficult to envisage how such discourse could become a reality, while staff perceived the need for their actions to be sanctioned by the headteacher.

That said, each headteacher recognised that their distributed perspective was work in progress, not yet deeply embedded in school practice. They acknowledged from staff responses that not all considered leadership to be an integral part of their professional identity or recognised themselves as playing a leadership role (Murphy *et al.*, 2009). The first headteacher suggested that the professional identity of teachers had not yet extended to ‘teacher as leader’. All three headteachers had taken up post in schools where a top-down leadership and management style was established. It had taken around two years to reach a fairly rudimentary point on the distributed leadership spectrum, reflected by the first headteacher’s comment that, ‘it’s been a long journey and it’s been a hard journey at this school’. The stage of development reached was unique to each teacher with a spectrum of understanding and engagement evident.



The headteachers recognised their ultimate accountability, making it difficult for them to let go of power and control (Leithwood *et al.*, 2009b) as articulated by the third headteacher: ‘there is control and there is management of people’. She expressed both comfort and discomfort with the view from staff that she and her depute comprised ‘*the management*’. She recognised this was both convenient in providing her with authority and frustrating in providing staff with an opt-out from engagement. She claimed to want to change staff perceptions in that regard, recognising such parameters did not sit well with the collective responsibility behind distributed leadership.

In the absence of a blueprint from either policy or literature, each headteacher and each set of staff were engaged in making sense of and socially constructing a distributed perspective in practice, involving the active engagement in collaborative professional learning processes. Each headteacher drew confidence, knowledge and understanding of the practice of distributed leadership from their leadership and management experience to date, as well as from an understanding of school improvement practices, the literature on school improvement and the policy discourse. Each identified that engagement with work-based postgraduate study had been highly influential in that regard.

### **Concluding comments**

As policy makers across the international community continue to contemplate effective ways of leading and managing schools and in relation to that, effective ways of preparing headteachers and developing the leadership capabilities of the wider staff body, this study would suggest the influence that postgraduate programmes can have beyond the individual participant, developing informed understandings, the confidence to challenge established

norms as well as the ability to critically reflect on and change practice. However, even with informed headteachers committed to a distributed perspective on leadership, the challenges of changing the culture of schools simultaneously with the challenge of developing the professional identities of teaching and support staff to encompass a leadership dimension cannot be underestimated.

Given their potential influence, leadership development programmes would do well to recognise the complex nature of a distributed leadership, problematising with candidates their experience and understandings of a distributed perspective in practice. Furthermore, it might be helpful to candidates and their headteacher supporters to communicate explicitly the intentions behind a distributed perspective, the implications of that perspective and the challenges as well as the opportunities it presents for school practice.

This study would suggest that in developing a distributed perspective, schools would benefit from further support. In the current policy climate, with calls for universities and schools to work more closely together in order to facilitate high quality professional learning for teachers (Donaldson, 2010) together with the knowledge transfer and research impact agendas, there is merit in the approaches taken in this study to develop understandings of the school as a lived organization. By working with headteachers and school staff to support their diagnosis and design work (Spillane and Caldron, 2011: 20; 17; 19; 105) the data collected could provide a lens, supporting an ‘outsider stance’ for ‘savvy leaders’ committed to ‘reflection-in-practice’, since:

Diagnosis and design, like most work, require tools. Chief among these tools are the conceptual ones that we bring to the work of diagnosis and design.

There is of course a financial cost to such support. However, this study would suggest that the practice of distributed leadership is far from secure. If distributed leadership is to become more than empty policy rhetoric succeeded by the next hip leadership paradigm, then it requires financial as well as practice commitment for the professional learning of staff in schools.

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